

Hunger and Its Solutions in New Jersey: A Supplemental Brief on the Landscape of the Federal Nutrition Programs

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Background

Food insecurity is a significant social determinant of health that affects far too many people in New Jersey. In 2020, 1 in 12 households experienced food insecurity, meaning 285,000 New Jersey households did not have reliable access to affordable, nutritious food. There are stark disparities in food insecurity that exist within the state which must be addressed to create an equitable opportunity for good health for all. Community disinvestment and systems of oppression like systemic racism have resulted in disproportionate burdens of food insecurity along geographic lines and by race and ethnicity. COVID-19 has exacerbated longstanding disparities in food insecurity and access to healthy food. Analysis of the Census Household Pulse Survey shows that in 2021, 14 percent of Black households and 18 percent of Latino households in New Jersey indicated that they sometimes or often did not have enough to eat, experienced “food insufficiency,” compared to 5 percent of white households.

In response to the significance of the issue of food insecurity and the opportunity costs of not comprehensively addressing it, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) embarked on an *Assessment of the Landscape of Hunger and its Solutions in New Jersey*. The aim of this statewide assessment of New Jersey's existing food access and hunger landscape is to inform stakeholders about which policies, systems changes, cross-sector outreach, and programmatic initiatives, if implemented in the coming years, would result in the most significant gains in food security. As part of this assessment, we actively elicited input from diverse stakeholders across the food system sectors, including residents with lived expertise with hunger and poverty (hereon referred to as residents with lived expertise). We engaged more than 150 stakeholders through key informant meetings, focus groups with residents with lived expertise, and a series of advisory work group convenings.

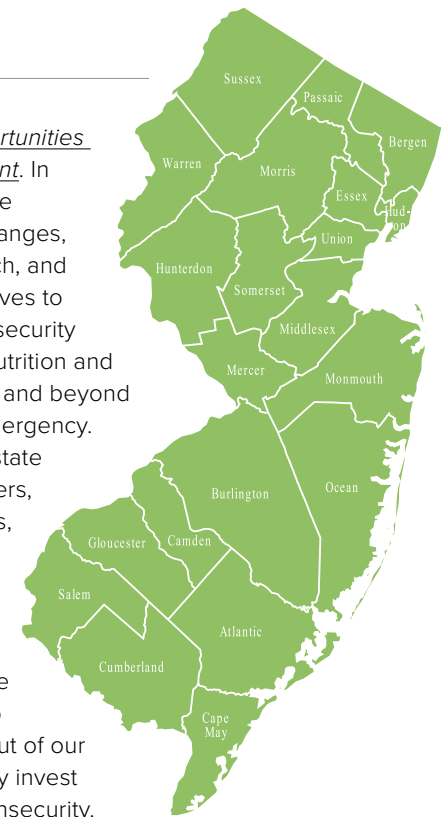
The results of this assessment and recommendations generated from the findings can be found in the report, *Hunger and Its Solutions in New Jersey: Landscape Analysis of Current Initiatives, Recommended Action,*

and Emerging Opportunities for Further Investment.

In the report, we outline policies, systems changes, cross-sector outreach, and programmatic initiatives to help reduce food insecurity and support good nutrition and health equity during and beyond the public health emergency. Now is the time for state and local policymakers, state agency leaders, community and nonprofit groups, philanthropic organizations, leaders in the private sector, and others to collaborate, break out of our silos, and collectively invest in addressing food insecurity. We urge stakeholders to come together to advance the report recommendations.

Leveraging the federal nutrition programs is a key strategy to help reduce and prevent food insecurity effectively and equitably. Therefore, as a supplement to the report, this brief provides further information on the landscape of federal nutrition programs in New Jersey, including program basics, who administers the program, program participation, and COVID-19 related changes.

Federal nutrition programs detailed in this brief include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); School Breakfast Program (SBP); National School Lunch Program (NSLP); Summer Nutrition Programs; Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), Afterschool Meal Program, Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT), Commodity Supplemental Food Program, Home-delivered Meals, SNAP Education, and Congregate Senior Nutrition Programs.



Federal Nutrition Program Landscape in New Jersey

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT)

Child Nutrition Programs

Home-delivered Meals and Congregate Senior Nutrition Programs

Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)

SNAP Education (SNAP-Ed)

The federal nutrition programs—upstream approaches to help reduce and prevent food insecurity—are linked to a wide range of positive outcomes. Federal nutrition programs improve dietary intake and nutrition quality; support healthy growth of children; boost learning and academic achievement; reduce poverty and increase family economic security; lower health care spending; and enhance food retail environments.^{1,2,3,4,5}

In New Jersey, reasonable enhancements to the federal nutrition programs have the potential to significantly reduce food insecurity and infuse millions of dollars into New Jersey local economies each year. The positive impacts of federal nutrition program benefits spread quickly. As families with low incomes pay for food locally at grocery stores, farmers markets, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, they support actors across the food chain, from farmers and food producers to long haul truck drivers, food retailers, and store employees.⁶ Nutrition benefits also make a difference for state and local budgets.⁷ When New Jersey residents use federal nutrition program benefits to pay for food, they can use other resources to pay for non-food basics that often are subject to sales tax. Generated revenue can in turn can be invested in the community's health.

The food environment impacts the effectiveness of the federal nutrition programs, and likewise, the food programs impact food systems. Therefore, shaping food systems to maximize the value of benefits for food program clients and leveraging the power of the food programs to support a robust and just food system are key strategies to continue to improve the federal nutrition programs. Similarly, the federal nutrition programs shape our food system. For example, it is well documented that food retail outlets that accept WIC have healthier food options than similar outlets that do not.⁹ Federal nutrition programs also increase the purchasing power of communities. This increased purchasing power has been shown to incentivize convenience stores to become SNAP-authorized and presents an opportunity to partner with larger grocery stores to expand into these communities. Flexibilities or incentives for local food procurement in the federal nutrition programs provide new market channels for small and medium food producers.¹⁰



Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

SNAP is a federal/state partnership. Benefits are funded 100 percent by the federal government. Administrative expenses are shared between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and states and counties. SNAP serves people of all ages and in all types of communities. Those who qualify receive Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards to use to purchase food from authorized food retailers.

By building on the regular channels of commerce, this government program provides a cost-effective, efficient, and mainstream way for millions of low-income people to obtain their groceries with dignity and in ways similar to other consumers. In federal fiscal year (FFY) 2021, 5,807 food retailers in New Jersey were authorized to accept SNAP benefits; together they redeemed a total of more than \$2.6 billion in SNAP, SNAP Emergency Allotments, and P-EBT purchases.¹¹

Federal eligibility rules provide income and resource limits for people to qualify for SNAP but allow states to apply for a variety of options and waivers to vary those rules.¹² Most applicants must meet both gross and net income tests. In New Jersey, the SNAP gross income test is 185 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL).¹³ This allows the state to screen more applicants and determine whether their expenses for other basics like shelter and child care render their net incomes at or below the net income test (100 percent of the FPL).

New Jersey is a county-administered and state-supervised SNAP state. The New Jersey Department of Human Services (DHS) is the administering agency, and county human services agencies operate the program for their respective areas.

In addition to fully funding SNAP benefits, USDA provides money to states for conducting SNAP outreach and application assistance on a 50/50 federal/state reimbursement basis, implementing SNAP Education, known as SNAP-Ed, and offering SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) (the latter has both a 50/50 federal/

state reimbursement funding stream as well as a limited 100 percent federal allocation). USDA also offers a number of competitive grant opportunities. For example, in FFY 2020 USDA awarded the New Jersey Human Services Department a \$944,810 SNAP Process and Technology Grant to “redesign the online application portal and create a new customer service portal and text message notification system that alerts clients to key case updates.” The new features aimed “to improve customer service by increasing functionality that allows clients to have more access to real-time case information.”¹⁴ We understand that the new features are expected to be implemented in 2022.

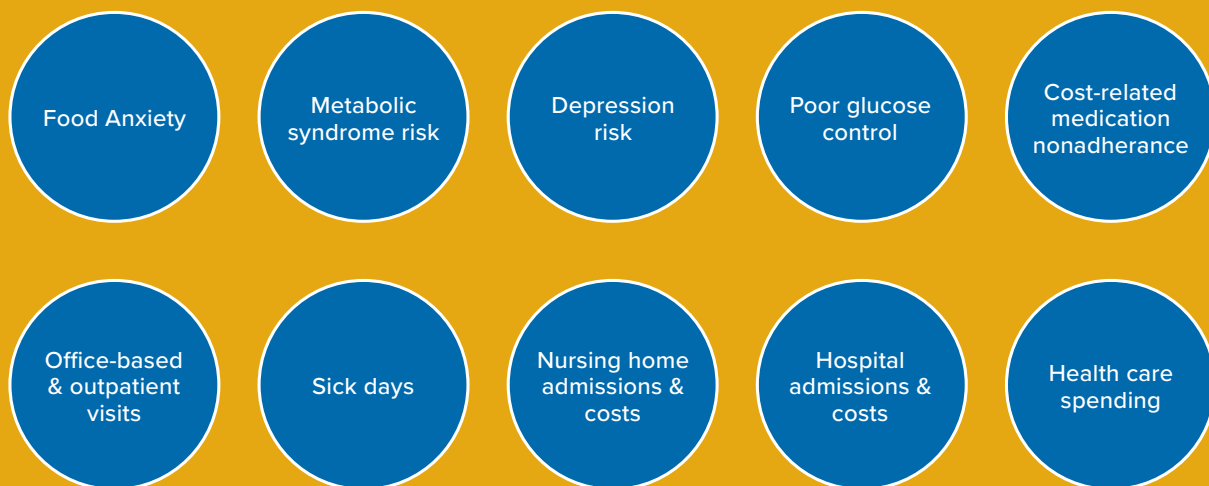
SNAP has positive impacts on food security, health, and well-being.¹⁵ It also has important economic impacts. Each \$1 in SNAP benefits during an economic downturn generates between \$1.50-\$1.80 in economic activity.¹⁶ Moreover, SNAP benefits liberate participants’ tight budgets to spend money on other necessities that generate state tax revenue.

The National Grocers Association estimates that in 2020, SNAP in New Jersey:

- ▶ was responsible for 3,263 jobs across grocery and supporting industries, including agriculture, manufacturing, transportation and municipal services;
- ▶ generated more than \$128.4 million in grocery industry jobs and related wages; and
- ▶ was responsible for generating \$18.8 million in additional state and local tax revenues.¹⁷

Separate funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation supported work in 2020 and 2021 by FRAC, The Food Trust, and Hunger Free New Jersey (HFNJ) to tap input from New Jersey SNAP participants and stakeholders to inform recommendations for improving SNAP’s reach and effectiveness in promoting health and racial equity in New Jersey. It complemented and built on the preexisting SNAP work group that HFNJ has convened for many years.

SNAP IMPROVES THE HEALTH OF ADULTS AND SENIORS BY REDUCING:



SNAP Participation

In recent years New Jersey has made progress on serving more eligible people, but its 81 percent participation rate in 2018 ranked 28 out of all states and the District of Columbia¹⁸ and left federal funds on the table in Washington, DC, which could have gone to more New Jersey households in need. In 2020, HFNJ estimated New Jersey's SNAP Gap left 300,000 low-income people unserved.¹⁹ Some groups have been disproportionately affected by the gap.

SNAP During COVID-19

For the SNAP project in 2020 and 2021, our partner Propel conducted an online survey to elicit feedback from 500 New Jersey SNAP households that subscribe to its app Providers (previously called Fresh EBT). HFNJ also partnered with community-based organizations to garner additional input from New Jersey residents likely eligible for but not participating in SNAP. HFNJ convened a broad cross section of stakeholders for three virtual calls to discuss survey findings, to identify barriers to program participation particularly among various populations and counties, and to develop consensus recommendations for building on the progress New Jersey has made to improve SNAP's reach and customer service.

FIGURE 1

EXCERPT FROM HUNGER FREE NEW JERSEY REPORT, BOOSTING NJ SNAP

When survey respondents were asked how to make SNAP more accessible to more New Jersey residents, the number one answer was: **Make it easier to get help from the county welfare office.** Two other top responses were related to the application process, with respondents saying that the application should be easier to complete and require less documentation and other paperwork.

SNAP-eligible respondents also said that the benefit amount, which is set at the federal level, should be higher, and that the income limits, also set by the federal government, should be raised, especially in high-cost New Jersey where people earning over the current limits still struggle to make ends meet.

The report *Boosting NJ SNAP: Eliminating Barriers to Participation* released in May 2021 summarizes SNAP customers' feedback, outlines recommendations, and lists the 50 stakeholder groups that participated in the project. An excerpt from the report is highlighted in Figure 1.

The 2021 SNAP report recommendations fell into several broad categories:

1. **Streamline the application process by reducing paperwork required from applicants and updating the online application system to be user-friendly.**
2. **Expand community outreach to educate the public about the program and assist more potentially eligible residents in completing the application process, with a focus on college students, older adults, immigrants and the newly unemployed.**
3. **Examine the level of customer service provided at county Boards of Social Services to identify challenges and solutions at the county level.**

The 2021 SNAP recommendations were informed by feedback about SNAP in New Jersey prior to and during COVID-19. Starting in spring 2020, the federal government began offering states ways to get greater SNAP benefit amounts to SNAP households and to ease some rules regarding enrollment and recertification.

During COVID-19, New Jersey aggressively pursued and received available federal waivers, including to (1) extend certification periods and waive periodic reporting requirements of income or other changes between recertifications; (2) eliminate interviews before being approved for SNAP; (3) allow telephonic signatures on applications; and (4) increase monthly benefit amounts by leveraging the COVID-19 SNAP Emergency Allotments (EAs).²⁰ The SNAP EAs bring all households up to the maximum benefit amount for their household size, and pursuant to Biden Administration policy, give an extra \$95 a month to the poorest households that already qualified for maximum benefit amounts. New Jersey has continued to leverage this federal funding and most recently was approved to issue EAs again in March 2022.

Many of the current SNAP flexibilities are at risk when the federal government Pandemic Public Health Emergency Declaration expires. At that point, on average, SNAP participants in New Jersey will lose \$82 a person a month in SNAP benefits.²¹ Many college students will lose SNAP access that has been eased for them since January 2021, and time limits on SNAP benefits for certain unemployed and underemployed adults will be applicable again across the country. Moreover, with termination of the Public Health Emergency Declaration, some SNAP procedural flexibilities will end, likely increasing burdens on both clients and caseworkers.²²

New Jersey could mitigate some of the negative impact on benefit reductions if it invests funds to supplement regular federal SNAP benefits. It also could prioritize helping more SNAP customers claim the full value of SNAP deductions to which they are entitled, such as child care costs incurred by households with children and medical costs incurred by clients who are elderly or have a disability.

There may be some opportunities ahead for New Jersey to gain federal approval for practices that proved effective during COVID-19, possibly through waivers. Administrative advocacy at the federal level could improve the chances that USDA would provide approvals and guidance. Many of the recommendations in the 2021 SNAP report, however, could be implemented in one or more counties without additional authority. For example, additional interviews conducted in 2022 have provided information on some work New Jersey state agencies already are pursuing for cross-program coordination and data sharing to promote enrolling onto SNAP more WIC households and more households with children who are certified for free school meals. Moreover, on an administrative basis, New Jersey has moved from a mandatory SNAP E&T model to a voluntary one, a much more customer-centered approach.



Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

WIC is a federal nutrition program, administered by the New Jersey Department of Health, that provides low-income, nutritionally at-risk pregnant and postpartum individuals, infants, and children up to 5 years old with nutritious foods, nutrition education, breastfeeding support, and referrals to health care. Income eligibility for WIC is automatic for individuals participating in Medicaid or SNAP. For those individuals who do not have automatic income eligibility, the income limit is 185 percent of the poverty level with no asset tests. The New Jersey Department of Health administers WIC through a network of local agencies that provide services through WIC clinics.

WIC is an important resource for New Jersey families with young children. WIC improves participants' health, dietary intake, and birth and health outcomes.²³ WIC also supports learning and development, reduces food insecurity, and helps to alleviate poverty. In addition, WIC supports economic stability and improves the availability

of healthy foods in low-income communities through participating stores.

WIC Participation

In 2019, 58.1 percent of the approximately 230,000 WIC-eligible persons in New Jersey participated in the program²⁴; this is an increase from 57.0 percent in 2018.²⁵ The proportion of eligible persons participating, or coverage rate, varies by participant category. Almost 95 percent of eligible infants participated in WIC, but only 47 percent of eligible children participated in New Jersey in 2019. The U.S. average coverage rate is 57.4 percent, and New Jersey ranks 21st in coverage rate compared to other states (best to worst). Millions of dollars are being left on the table with just over half of eligible participants enrolled in the program.

In federal fiscal year 2021, New Jersey WIC served an average of 141,700 participants each month.²⁶ Participation has continued to grow with 142,800 participants enrolled in WIC in October 2021, the latest available month of data. This represents a 7.9 percent increase compared to February 2020 (132,400 participants), the baseline month before the COVID-19 pandemic.

WIC During COVID-19

New Jersey has performed well on increasing WIC participation over this period compared to the Mid-Atlantic region and the nation. The Mid-Atlantic region had a 2.2 percent decline in participation, and the nation had a 3.3 percent increase from February 2020 to October 2021. Trends are detailed in this [New Jersey WIC profile](#).

If WIC participation were to increase an additional 7.9 percent in New Jersey, the increase in benefits would conservatively bring in an additional \$4.7 million per year to local grocery stores and economies.²⁷ This estimate is low as it does not factor in the [increased value of WIC's fruit and vegetable benefit](#), which increased the value of monthly fruit and vegetable vouchers from \$9 for children and \$11 for pregnant and postpartum participants to \$24 for children and \$43–\$47 for pregnant and postpartum participants. This increase is authorized through September 2022 and may be extended. New Jersey is one of the states that allows regular monthly fruit and vegetable benefits to be redeemed at approved farmers markets and roadside stands, furthering the potential for WIC to directly benefit local agriculture and communities.

WIC participation did not change at the same rate in all New Jersey counties, with some counties increasing participation and some decreasing. A variety of potential factors impact these WIC participation rates including the rate of increased need, local WIC agency staff and outreach capacities, and a variety of local circumstances.

WIC Outreach: Counties have varying levels of WIC outreach, promotion, and coordination with WIC participants and other sectors. Effective WIC outreach and referral partnerships and coordination with the health care sector, social service providers, advocates, emergency food providers, and community partners facilitate WIC access and help address health inequities.

Staff Capacity: Entering COVID-19, counties had varying levels of capacity to manage the increased number of families eligible for services. Some local agencies could not pivot to remote services as easily, some were understaffed and overburdened

THE WIC PROGRAM:



Reduces food insecurity



Alleviates poverty



Supports economic stability



Improves dietary intake



Protects against obesity



Improves birth outcomes



Improves health outcomes



Supports learning and development



Reduces health care and other costs



Improves retail food environments

by increased caseloads, unable to meet demand. It is possible that some public health departments redirected some WIC staff time to COVID-19 contact tracing and other tasks.

When comparing the change in WIC participation to measures of health outcomes via our GIS map, Mercer and Cumberland counties have relatively high infant mortality and low birthweight rates, and both had large declines in WIC participation during COVID-19. Since WIC has been shown to improve birth outcomes,²⁸ specialized efforts to enroll pregnant individuals would be especially beneficial in these counties.

SPOTLIGHT

Upcoming Opportunity—WIC and WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program Outreach, Innovation, and Program Modernization Strategy

The American Rescue Plan Act provided the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) with \$390 million for outreach, modernization, and innovation efforts for WIC and the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. USDA has developed a framework for investment of the funds including the following efforts to:

- ▶ raise awareness of WIC's benefits and services;
- ▶ certify people for program benefits in a way that is participant centered;
- ▶ improve the shopping experience; and
- ▶ ensure equitable access to program benefits via building new local partnerships to ensure WIC clinics are meeting the needs of their service community and providing culturally appropriate and competent care.

New Jersey WIC can leverage this strategy to increase WIC enrollment and retention and reduce disparities in program delivery as funding is made available.



The New Jersey Department of Health acted quickly during COVID-19 to implement federal waivers that have allowed WIC to offer appointments over the phone, issue benefits remotely, and offer flexibilities in the WIC shopping experience like substitutions for unavailable food products. Together, these temporary changes have streamlined access to the program for families and enabled participants to use their WIC benefits more fully amidst food supply chain issues and social distancing requirements.

Participants in our focus groups ubiquitously expressed appreciation for remote access to WIC during COVID-19 and that they would like to see remote services continued in addition to in-person options. Participants liked remote benefit access because it saved them time, was safer for them and their families, and produced high-quality service.

“With having to work full time even through COVID and with the kids, getting the phone calls was so much easier and I was thankful for that because the services didn’t stop, and we were able to get the information over the phone.” — Focus group participant

In addition to navigating COVID-19 related changes, including an increase in fruit and vegetable benefits, New Jersey WIC is in the process of transitioning from paper voucher benefits to electronic benefits on an eWIC card. Participants are eager for the transition to eWIC in the hopes of alleviating some of the stress and embarrassment that can accompany using WIC check vouchers at the store. As vendors work to change over their point-of-sale technologies to accommodate the new eWIC system, ensuring equitable access for farmers markets, other small vendors, and vendors who primarily serve immigrant families remained a priority for stakeholders that we engaged.

“At the register it gets very embarrassing—you hold the line up; most cashiers do not know how to do it. If you picked the wrong item, I usually just pass on it because everybody’s looking at me and it’s an uncomfortable experience.”

— Focus group participant

Focus group participants who are enrolled in WIC expressed they sometimes felt frustration and embarrassment when using WIC benefits at the grocery store. Inadequate labeling of WIC-approved foods, cashiers’ low perceptions and knowledge of WIC, too few WIC vendors, and discrepancies between foods advertised in the Food Guide as WIC approved versus which foods the stores would accept as WIC approved were frequently cited as needs to address in the WIC shopping experience



by focus group participants. Some participants have even tried changing stores or forgo certain foods on their benefit voucher because of this issue. Participants recommended better labeling of WIC foods, more WIC training for store employees, a dedicated clerk for WIC purchases, and an on-demand WIC advocate to help with discrepancies at the store. WIC-Only Stores were discussed as a potential solution to challenges with the WIC shopping experience.

SPOTLIGHT

Statewide eWIC Rollout

All New Jersey WIC participants will soon receive and redeem their nutrition benefits using an eWIC card (a card similar to a debit card) in place of benefit check vouchers. New Jersey WIC has successfully piloted eWIC in three counties, and statewide rollout began in January 2022. Accompanying the new eWIC technology is a WIC Shopper App that will allow participants to view their benefits, find their nearest grocer or WIC office, and scan food items at the store to check for eligibility.

Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT)

Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT), created in March 2020, provides nutritional resources to families who have lost access to free or reduced-price school meals due to school or child care closures. Families receive money on a new or existing EBT card to help fill the school and child care meals gap. The New Jersey Department of Human Services administers the program, with assistance from the New Jersey Department of Agriculture. New Jersey created and implemented P-EBT plans for the spring of 2020, school year 2020–2021, and summer 2021 and is currently in the process of developing a plan for school year 2021–2022.

P-EBT Data

While actual participation data is not available, \$305 million in P-EBT benefits went to New Jersey families in FY 2020 and over \$660 million in FY 2021 to offset the costs of missed meals at school and in child care.²⁹ P-EBT functions very similarly to SNAP at the grocery store and therefore also has an economic impact multiplier: For each \$1.00 of federal P-EBT benefits spent during an economic downturn, it generates between \$1.50 and \$1.80 in economic activity.



Child Nutrition Programs

Federal nutrition programs include the child nutrition programs which support healthy meals and snacks served to children in child care, school, after school settings. The School Breakfast Program (SBP); National School Lunch Program (NSLP); Summer Nutrition Programs; Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and Afterschool Meal Program are a proven success.^{30,31,32}

School Breakfast Program (SBP) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP)

SBP and NSLP provide reimbursements for healthy breakfasts and lunches served to children each school day. Any child who attends a school offering school meals can participate, but meals are provided at no cost or at a reduced price to children based on their household income, and some high-needs schools are able to offer free school meals to all students. These child nutrition programs support academic achievement, reduce food insecurity, and improve health, making them as critical for students' academic success as textbooks and transportation. This role has become even more important than ever as the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced unprecedented food insecurity and economic hardships for families in New Jersey.

SCHOOL MEAL PARTICIPATION

After making strong progress for several years, New Jersey lost ground on ensuring all students access to nutritious meals during the school day in the 2019–2020 school year, before schools shut their doors due to the pandemic.

Between September and February of the 2019–2020 school year, 242,959 low-income students participated in the School Breakfast Program and 420,059 participated in the National School Lunch Program in New Jersey. The state slipped to 25th nationally in breakfast participation among low-income students in the 2019–2020 school year. In 2018, New Jersey ranked 18th. Millions of federal dollars are being left on the table for both programs when schools do not implement best practices to maximize participation in the program.

SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMS DURING COVID-19

In March 2020, schools across New Jersey shuttered in response to the pandemic, and most school districts provided instruction virtually or through a hybrid model for part or all of the 2020–2021 school year. This shift away from students being physically in school caused significant new challenges for schools to provide meals that families could still access.

Nationwide child nutrition waivers issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) have been key to supporting continued access to breakfast and lunch as communities across New Jersey struggle with and adapt to the ongoing public health crisis. The flexibilities provided by the waivers have made it possible for meals to be served safely during the pandemic, including allowing meals to be taken home, for parents or guardians to pick up meals for their children, and for multiple days' worth of meals to be distributed at one time. Most impactful, the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) waivers have allowed schools (and other SFSP sponsors) to offer meals at no charge to all children while also reducing

the administrative burden on school nutrition departments, eliminating school meals debt, reducing stigma, and providing a level of reimbursement that is more commensurate with the additional costs created by the pandemic.

While these waivers have enabled schools to continue providing meals, the pandemic has simultaneously exacerbated existing barriers to school meals participation while introducing new ones: staffing limitations, additional transportation needs, limited access to meal sites during remote learning days, and extreme supply chain disruptions. All of these challenges and more have further stretched already tight school budgets and resources.

As New Jersey makes plans for the future, it is important that schools implement best practices to support strong participation in school meals—such as offering all meals free of charge, breakfast-after-the-bell programs, improving the quality and appeal of meals served, and ensuring students have enough time to get through the cafeteria line and eat during lunch.

In addition, school nutrition departments will need ongoing support from USDA and policymakers to recover from the financial and operational challenges created by the pandemic. The waivers that have been critical to maintaining school meal operations must remain available as long as needed. Similarly, the funding provided in the Consolidated Appropriations Act to offset the reduced participation in spring 2020, the higher reimbursement rate provided by SFSP under the SSO waiver during the 2020–2021 school year, and the much-needed \$1.5 billion that USDA has made available to help overcome the supply chain challenges during the current school year have helped bolster school nutrition finances, and more of these types of financial support may be needed.

Most impactful has been the opportunity for schools in New Jersey to offer meals to all children at no charge, an option that has been critical during the pandemic. In order to fully overcome the educational, health, and economic impacts of the pandemic on children and families, and the financial challenges created by the pandemic for school nutrition departments, offering breakfast and lunch at no charge to all students should remain the new normal.

FEDERAL CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS:



Reduces food insecurity



Alleviates poverty



Improves nutrition and health outcomes



Protect against obesity



Boosts learning and development



Supports economic stability



Summer Nutrition Programs

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides free meals and snacks to children 18 and under when school is not in session. Sites are located in communities where at least half of the children are from families with incomes at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) or primarily serve children from families with low incomes. The Seamless Summer Option (SSO) is an alternative program for schools to provide free meals and snacks in low-income areas. The meals served through SSO must follow the nutrition standards and guidelines for the federal National School Lunch Program.

The programs are administered at the federal level by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and in New Jersey through the state Department of Agriculture. When school lets out, millions of low-income children lose access to the school breakfasts and lunches and afterschool snacks and meals they receive during the regular school year. The Summer Nutrition Programs help fill this gap by providing free meals and snacks to children who might otherwise go hungry.

Nationwide child nutrition waivers issued by USDA in spring 2020 provided schools and community partners the flexibility needed to serve meals safely during the pandemic, including allowing meals to be taken home, for parents or guardians to pick up meals for their children, and for multiple days' worth of meals to be distributed at one time. In addition, USDA waived the requirement that summer meal sites must be located in an area in which at least half of the children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. As a result of these waivers and community collaboration, school districts and community sponsors were able to serve more children in New Jersey during the summer.

SUMMER NUTRITION PROGRAMS PARTICIPATION

In summer 2020, New Jersey communities nearly tripled the number of free meals provided to children, while doubling the number of children reached. This federally funded nutrition helped to reduce childhood hunger during a time when many families faced job loss or reduced hours because of the COVID pandemic. In July 2020 alone, more than 9 million meals were provided to roughly 203,000



children throughout New Jersey—a 183 percent increase in meals served over July 2019. For the first time ever, New Jersey exceeded a national benchmark of reaching 40 percent of children who receive free or low-cost school meals, serving 51 percent of students who received free or reduced-price lunch at school during the academic year.

The reason for this increase is threefold: Due to the pandemic, community leaders had a heightened awareness of the need to feed children in summer 2020, leading many communities to participate in federal summer meal programs that had not done so in the past; USDA issued waivers that provided much needed flexibility for schools, nonprofit organizations, and local government agencies to serve children; and a new state law went into effect requiring high-poverty school districts to participate in the federal Summer Food Service Program (SFSP).

New Jersey schools and community organizations must build on this momentum and continue to implement and expand summer meals throughout New Jersey. Starting in June 2022, the state will provide another incentive to ensuring access to summer meals by providing a 10 cent per meal supplement to federal reimbursements for summer meals.



Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

CACFP is a federal nutrition program administered by the New Jersey Department of Agriculture that supports nutritious meals and snacks for eligible children who are enrolled at participating child care centers, family child care homes, afterschool programs, and homeless shelters. The majority of CACFP participants are in child care. Children at participating family child care homes, child care centers, or Head Start programs can receive up to two meals and a snack that meet USDA nutritional standards. Providers using CACFP must serve all children enrolled in care. CACFP improves young children's nutrition, promotes healthy development, strengthens the quality of early care, and helps boost and stabilize child care providers' income and services. In New Jersey, the program funds, \$62 million in a normal year, provide an economic stimulus as money flows directly into the economy to buy food and pay for food service labor, and helps to sustain child care providers.

The New Jersey Department of Agriculture enrolls child centers, afterschool programs and homeless shelters directly, and contracts with nonprofit sponsoring organizations to enroll and supervise family child care homes. There are also independent sponsors of afterschool programs (e.g., YMCA) and a limited number of centers.

CACFP PARTICIPATION

In New Jersey during fiscal year 2021, CACFP providers served 30 million meals. The program served an average of 70,000 children each working day. Over \$62 million in CACFP reimbursements supported healthy meals and snacks for children in child care, afterschool programs, and shelters in New Jersey.

CACFP DURING COVID-19

During the first year of the pandemic (March 2020 through February 2021), New Jersey CACFP providers served 17 million meals—nearly 1 million (967,365) meals in family child care homes and nearly 16 million (15.9 million) meals in child care centers. Total CACFP reimbursements infused into local economies were \$32,870,224—\$1.6 million for family child care homes and \$31 million for child care centers.

Due to the shutdown of child care during the pandemic, CACFP participation declined. During the first year of COVID-19 (March 2020 through February 2021), CACFP served 19 million fewer meals in New Jersey, a 53 percent decrease, compared to the same months in 2019. Most of the decline in New Jersey was from child care centers, with 18.9 million fewer meals served (54 percent decrease), compared to the 24 percent decrease in the number of meals served (–301,086) in family child care homes. Nationally, the CACFP meal decline in the first year of COVID-19 was 30 percent overall, 32 percent for child care centers and 21 percent for family child care homes.

As a result of decreases in the number of meals served, New Jersey CACFP child care providers' reimbursements were 51 percent lower (–\$34 million) in the first year of COVID-19. The decline in New Jersey meal reimbursement followed the pattern of the reduced number of meals served: The loss in reimbursement funding was more severe for child care centers (a 52 percent decline: –\$33,482,038) than family child care homes (a 19 percent decline: –\$360,241). Nationally, CACFP reimbursement fell 25 percent overall in the first year of COVID-19, 27 percent for child care centers and 17 percent for family child care homes.

When children miss out on CACFP meals and snacks, it strains family budgets, contributing to food insecurity. Additionally, child care providers and sponsors lose out on reimbursements needed to support fixed costs. This loss contributes to deficits in already overburdened child care budgets, and creates instability in the infrastructure for providing child care to many families across New Jersey. There was a one-time limited stopgap federal CACFP emergency funding, which did not cover all the lost costs but was helpful.

While many family child care homes and child care centers had been closed in light of COVID-19, participation in CACFP at child care locations has ramped up as people return to work. The New Jersey Department of Agriculture has implemented the USDA COVID-19 waivers to support providing CACFP meals during the pandemic. These waivers allow much needed flexibility around administration, oversight, and meal service.

The most recent federal waiver has the potential to significantly increase participation by family child care homes. Normally, only homes in the limited areas deemed “area eligible” can automatically receive the full reimbursement rate for meals and snacks served. The full reimbursement (Tier 1 level) is twice the lower level of reimbursement (Tier 2 level). It is arduous to attain the full reimbursement rate outside of the limited designated areas. For this reason, very few providers participate outside of the designated areas. Now, under a new USDA waiver, all areas will be automatically eligible for the full CACFP reimbursement rate. For example, a family child care provider caring for five children would receive \$6,200 a year for a breakfast, lunch, and a snack, rather than slightly less than \$3,000 (Tier 2 rate). If the waiver authority is continued, it appears the USDA is likely to extend this for the next fiscal year. It is important to make the most of this new waiver to bring family child care into CACFP.

The New Jersey state agency allows license-exempt regulated family child care. Family child care serves a diversity of families, including many with immigrant parents and many with variable shift work. Almost all of the providers are women-run and women-staffed enterprises, and many are women of color. Their businesses operate on extremely thin margins. Insights from recent interviews with family child care providers by the Service Employees International Union showed that running the business is a stressful distraction from working with children, and that providers want reliable support to run their programs: “I want to be able to spend quality time with the kids... not have a pile of paperwork to do.” In addition, providers are struggling to make up for lost funding during COVID.

The CACFP homeless shelter option has been expanded to serve young adults up to age 25 instead of the pre-COVID limit of 18 years old. This is an opportunity to expand participation by youth-serving shelters.

In New Jersey, a broad range of partners have expressed interest in productively engaging in expanding and strengthening CACFP including the early care and education community, advocates, parents, the New Jersey State



Department of Education, the New Jersey Interdepartmental Planning Group, and the health sector. Strategies identified by stakeholders to expand and strengthen CACFP follow.

Collaborate to enhance services: Partners can conduct CACFP outreach, promote best practices for cross-sector collaboration, share or create nutrition materials and trainings, address gaps created by capacity issues, and encourage and plan state summits, work groups, and meetings. These events provide an excellent forum to hear from providers, parents, and a full range of partners about the facilitators and barriers to CACFP participation and success. State child care subsidy and licensing agencies can create synergy with the new child care funding and strengthen systems to refer all providers to CACFP and share newly licensed and certified provider information with the CACFP agency to facilitate outreach. The federal child care subsidy program includes CACFP outreach under the consumer education regulations.

Support CACFP participation in underserved areas: Focus outreach and technical assistance on underserved areas and populations. Technical assistance not only should include understanding the

CACFP rules but also vending contracts. New Jersey center operators have indicated an interest in both topics. Possible strategies include:

- ▶ Generating a mentor program for child care centers to benefit from peer learning and to be supported in participating in CACFP;
- ▶ Inviting sponsors of unaffiliated centers to serve as an umbrella organization supporting child care centers that need additional assistance; and
- ▶ Running a match between child care locations that accept child care subsidies and those that participate in CACFP to determine a targeted list of locations not participating in CACFP.

Afterschool Meal Program

CACFP also offers the Afterschool Meal Program to help reduce childhood hunger in low-income communities, and to support the establishment, growth, and quality of afterschool enrichment programs. Through this program, suppers and snacks can be provided at sites in areas where at least half of the children are certified to receive free or reduced-price school meals. Children can receive a healthy meal after school, on weekends, and during school holidays, instead of returning home hungry, often to empty cupboards. The meal also helps draw children into programs that keep them safe, engaged, and learning while their parents are working. The Afterschool Meal Program only became available in New Jersey in 2010 and is still a relatively new option.

AFTERSCHOOL MEAL PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

Combined, the flexibilities and commitment of schools and community sponsors have helped support access to afterschool suppers and snacks. In October 2020, just over 13,000 children received an afterschool supper in New Jersey, reaching 3 children eligible for every 100 that participate in school lunch. If New Jersey met FRAC's goal of serving 15 children for every 100 that ate school lunch, New Jersey would see over \$3.5 million in additional federal funding.

AFTERSCHOOL MEAL PROGRAM DURING COVID-19

With the pandemic disrupting afterschool programming for students in New Jersey, schools and sponsors had to pivot and adjust their meal service operations to provide the suppers and snacks that families rely on. These efforts have been complicated by the fact that many afterschool programs—the foundation for meals to be served—have been forced to reduce their capacity, switch to virtual programming, or shutter completely. To ensure access to afterschool suppers and snacks, the USDA issued key nationwide waivers to provide the flexibility needed for schools and out-of-school time programs to provide suppers and snacks safely during the pandemic. These waivers allowed meals to be picked up and taken home, instead of eaten onsite alongside enrichment activities. They allowed school districts and community sponsors to adapt and adjust operations to provide meals to children in a variety of ways that minimized contact, including delivering meals directly to homes and providing meals at pickup or drive-through locations. USDA also ensured suppers and snacks could be

served to all children at no charge by waiving the requirement that afterschool meal sites be located in a low-income area, and allowed sites to meet the traditional enrichment activity requirement through virtual and take-home activities.

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE FEDERAL SCHOOL-AGE NUTRITION PROGRAMS

The school-age federal nutrition programs serve thousands of children each year in New Jersey and bring in millions of dollars. Increasing participation in school breakfast, summer nutrition programs, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program Afterschool Suppers to reasonable benchmark goals can bring in millions of dollars in additional federal funding to feed children and close the meal gap for families with low incomes. Figure 2 shows the coverage rate of these programs relative to free and reduced-price (F&RP) participation in the National School Lunch Program and how much additional funding New Jersey would receive if goal participation was met.

Figure 2

Federal Nutrition Program	Coverage Rate	Rank Among States (Best to Worst)	Year of Data	Additional Annual Federal Funding if Goal Achieved	Goal Participation
CACFP At-Risk Afterschool Suppers	3.0 ¹	27	October 2020	\$3,564,895	Additional Federal Reimbursement Dollars ² if Supper to NSLP Ratio Reached 15:100
School Breakfast Program	57.8 ³	25	School Year 2019 and 2020 (September–February)	\$10,032,737	Additional Annual Funding if 70 SBP per 100 NSLP F&RP Students
Summer Nutrition Programs⁴	22.4 ⁵	7	July 2019	\$6,302,212	Additional Federal Reimbursement Dollars if Summer Nutrition to NSLP Ratio Reached 40:100

1 Coverage Rate for Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) At-Risk Afterschool Suppers is relative to Free and Reduced-Price National School Lunch Program (NSLP) Participation. The coverage rate is a measure of average daily number of children participating in a supper program per 100 children participating in free or reduced-price school lunch.

2 Additional federal reimbursement dollars for CACFP At-Risk Afterschool Suppers are calculated assuming that the sites are reimbursed for each child at the federal reimbursement rate for free suppers (\$3.41 per supper) for the national average days of service in October.

3 School Breakfast Program Coverage Rate is relative to Free and Reduced-Price NSLP Participation. It is a measure of the ratio of the number of students participating in Free and Reduced-Price School Breakfast per 100 students participating in Free and Reduced-Price NSLP.

4 Summer Nutrition Programs includes the Summer Food Service Program and free and reduced-price NSLP during the summer, including the Seamless Summer Option.

5 Summer Nutrition Programs' Coverage Rate is relative to Free and Reduced-Price NSLP Participation. Coverage Rate of Summer Nutrition is the number of children in Summer Nutrition per 100 in NSLP.

Home-delivered Meals and Congregate Senior Nutrition Programs

The Home-delivered Meals and Congregate Nutrition Programs serve older adult populations in New Jersey. These two federal discretionary programs are administered by the New Jersey Department of Human Services (DHS). DHS provides oversight of the home- and community-based programs provided by or through New Jersey's 21 county offices on aging known as the Area Agencies on Aging (AAA). The Congregate Nutrition program provides a meal, typically lunch, which offers one third of the recommended daily dietary allowance and is provided in a group setting. The Home-delivered Meals program provides a meal, typically lunch, to homebound older adults which offers one third of the recommended daily dietary allowance. Studies showed both home-delivered and congregate meal services reduced malnourished status among older adults. Home-delivered meal services also increased the percentage of participants who met recommended daily allowances for energy intake, and improved energy intake, and well-being.³³ Both programs target older adults who have lower incomes, live in rural communities, speak limited English, or are at risk for institutional care. Home-delivered meals are for the homebound.

New Jersey has special additional funding through the state Casino Revenue Funds (currently set at \$970,000), which funds weekend and holiday home-delivered meals to the frail and elderly who have no other family or community support.

Home-delivered Meals and Congregate Senior Nutrition Programs Participation

In New Jersey, the home-delivered meals program and congregate nutrition program reached more than 19,500 and 26,600 older adults, respectively, in 2019 (latest data available from the Aging, Independence, and Disability Program Data Portal). These programs served as vital sources of meals for older adults in many communities. In 2019, over 4.6 million healthy meals were served to seniors and persons with disabilities. New Jersey

distributed \$46 million in reimbursement. COVID-19 resulted in the heightened need for nutrition assistance from these programs and for these programs to innovate to match the new reality.

Home-delivered Meals and Congregate Senior Nutrition Programs During COVID-19

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Community Living (ACL) granted additional flexibilities to assist state and local entities to adapt and expand service models to meet the unique challenges of serving older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. New Jersey adopted options to allow funds to be transferred between congregate and home-delivered meal programs, allow congregate programs to serve "grab and go" meals, and inclusion of older adults who are adhering to social distancing guidelines related to COVID-19 and can be considered homebound. While significant additional federal funding and flexibilities provided through federal COVID-19 legislation has enabled some providers to expand their critical services, this program will need ongoing resources to be able to continue to respond to hunger among older adult households.

As older adults are being served by these important nutrition programs, it is critical to bear in mind who is served with the limited resources these programs have. While the home-delivered and congregate meals programs are not means-tested, the Older Americans Act directs services



be targeted to those with the greatest economic and social needs, "with particular attention to low-income older individuals, including low-income minority older individuals, older individuals with limited English proficiency, and older individuals residing in rural areas."

New Jersey stakeholders reported older adults were particularly vulnerable to experiencing food insecurity and reported that food access and availability are common fears among older adults during the pandemic. Community outreach that effectively reaches older adults in ways they consume information was cited as important for the program to continue to reach this population.

National data for 2021 are not yet available, but the number of older adults receiving meals has increased, particularly home-delivered meals, due to social distancing necessitated by COVID-19. For example, by July 2020, national Meals on Wheels local programs reported successfully scaling up to serve 47 percent more older adults than pre-pandemic, and had increased the number of meals by 77 percent, reaching more than 1 million new clients.

SPOTLIGHT

Union County Senior Cafe

Union County has a Senior Café near you offering a healthy, delicious lunch for adults aged 60 and older. In addition to tasty, nutritionally balanced meals designed by our Registered Dietician, educational and social programs will add fun to your Senior Café Experience! Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Senior Cafes remain closed to the public. The County is temporarily offering "Grab and Go" meals twice a week throughout the County at designated senior centers. Reservations must be made in advance.

Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)

The CSFP also serves older adult populations in New Jersey. The CSFP works to improve the health of low-income persons at least 60 years of age by supplementing their diets with a box of nutritious USDA Foods. USDA distributes both food and administrative funds to the New Jersey Department of Health to administer the program. Food packages vary and can include a variety of foods: cheese; milk; fruit juice; farina or cold dry cereal or rolled oats; rice or pasta or grits; peanut butter or dry beans; canned meat or poultry or fish; canned fruits; and canned vegetables. In New Jersey, food banks distribute the CSFP boxes to eligible seniors monthly. The pandemic required shifting the delivery method. The boxes are not considered emergency foods.

CSFP Participation

For fiscal year 2022, the New Jersey CSFP—allocated caseload, 6,906 older adults, is at the same level as last year. Over \$580,000 in administrative funds has been allocated to cover all program costs including transportation.



SNAP Education (SNAP-Ed)

SNAP-Ed is a federally funded program, administered by the New Jersey Department of Human Services in partnership with the New Jersey Department of Health, that supports healthy eating, active living, and good health. SNAP-Ed serves SNAP participants and low-income individuals eligible to receive SNAP benefits or other means-tested federal assistance programs, such as Medicaid or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, as well as individuals residing in communities with a significant low-income population.

New Jersey's SNAP-Ed programs provide nutrition and physical education and teach practical shopping and healthy cooking skills to stretch limited budgets and maximize SNAP benefits. Classes, one-on-one meetings, campaigns, and community partnerships are key strategies. In addition, New Jersey's SNAP-Ed programs work on implementing policy, systems, and environmental approaches, such as multilevel interventions and community and public health approaches through food policy councils in some cities.

In New Jersey, SNAP-Ed funding for fiscal year 2022 is \$8,391,541, up slightly from \$7,850,773 in fiscal year 2021. SNAP-Ed implementing agencies in New Jersey include Rutgers University Department of Family and Community Health Sciences, a part of Rutgers Cooperative Extension, the Community Food Bank of New Jersey, and Zufall Health.

During COVID-19, SNAP-Ed pivoted to meet the needs of the community by helping individuals to navigate lockdowns, rising food costs, and supply chain disruptions. They have a continued focus on food insecurity and equity within their community partnership such as the food policy councils. New Jersey SNAP-Ed stakeholders identified the importance of addressing health equity through SNAP-Ed during COVID-19 and the transition back to full economic recovery.



Conclusion

The levels of food insecurity and inequities have serious consequences for the health and well-being of children and adults living in New Jersey. Beyond individuals and families, these consequences also have costly implications for the economy. Fortunately, solutions exist to help tackle these challenging issues, including increased utilization of the federal nutrition programs. The federal nutrition programs are important, effective, and widely available interventions to improve the health and well-being of vulnerable New Jerseyans while supporting local economies.

The federal nutrition programs are an important source of support in New Jersey, with millions of dollars infused

into New Jersey yearly. However, there are serious gaps in participation. More must be done to increase participation and strengthen the federal nutrition programs in New Jersey. Reasonable enhancements to the federal nutrition programs have the potential to significantly reduce food insecurity and infuse millions of dollars into New Jersey local economies each year. Policy recommendations in full report will allow state and local governments, schools, child care providers, community-based and faith-based organizations, emergency food providers, and others to connect more people to the federal nutrition programs so they can be thriving, healthy, and productive.



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