



## Summer EBT: Strategies for Communications and Outreach

### Introduction

The Summer EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) Program offers families \$40 per eligible child each month to help cover food expenses during the summer. Summer EBT is most successful when eligible families know about the program, choose to participate, and utilize the benefits. Some students will automatically qualify for Summer EBT if they qualify for free or reduced-price meals during the school year or can be streamline-certified through programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or Medicaid. Some families will need to apply for Summer EBT particularly if their student attends a community eligibility or Provision 2 school and is not directly certified through the program options listed above. For more information on eligibility, see the [Eligibility Guide](#) by the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC).

Based on U.S. Department of Agriculture regulations around Summer EBT, states must meet certain requirements for outreach. These include creating: (1) a hotline and a website utilized as a single point of contact for information and questions, (2) a plan for informing households of the availability of benefits and how to apply if necessary, and (3) a simplified way of opting out of the program. State agencies must also send notices to families at different points throughout the program. Notices must be sent within 15 operational days of when a child applies with approval status, as well as when a student is automatically eligible and no application is required.

This case study outlines state requirements for outreach and communication and highlights best practices.

### Methodology

Three anti-hunger organizations were interviewed by FRAC for this case study:

- Arizona Food Bank Network
- Greater Chicago Food Depository
- Hunger Solutions New York

FRAC also utilized examples of best practices from state agency websites to inform this case study.

## Best Practices for Summer EBT Outreach

### *Summer EBT Website*

A state's Summer EBT website serves as a valuable resource for sharing state-specific information with families and other stakeholders. States should have websites that provide, at a minimum, the following information:

- an explanation of Summer EBT, answers to frequently asked questions, and the number to call if there are additional questions;
- eligibility information, including which families are automatically enrolled and which need to apply;
- a link to the Summer EBT application;
- a notice that the program does not count against immigration status; and
- links to other food assistance programs and how to find summer meals sites in the community.

Depending on which agency hosts the Summer EBT website, the supporting agency — either the agency that administers the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or the agency that administers child nutrition programs — should provide a link to the main Summer EBT website.

Two strong examples of state Summer EBT websites come from Wisconsin and Nebraska. The [Wisconsin Department of Health Services](#) opens with an overview of the program and highlights when the majority of benefits are set to be issued. They also address public charge concerns near the top of the page. Families can easily access links to apply, update contact information, or call for support. Similarly, the [Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services](#) provides information on how to request a replacement card, offers a direct link to the application, and offers information on additional supports families may find helpful.

### *Toolkits*

Another way for states to support communication to families is by creating outreach toolkits that can be utilized by schools, advocacy organizations, and community organizations to help spread the word. Effective toolkits should include flyers and social media graphics with suggested captions, all translated into multiple languages to ensure broad accessibility.

[Maine](#) created a state-specific flyer with key information that was translated into 12 languages. They also created specific graphics for social media that can be utilized each month during the summer and fall to communicate with families. [Ohio](#) created flyers and translated them into eight languages.

## Partnerships

State agencies can be more effective in their outreach strategies if they tap into key partnerships that can help them spread the word. Families often rely on trusted sources when deciding to participate in programs, and those trusted voices vary across communities. Trusted sources include:

### ▪ Schools

Most families trust information that is shared with them by their school districts. However, schools are often overstretched and understaffed and do not have the capacity to create materials to share with families about Summer EBT. States can help by creating language that school districts can post on their own websites.

[Virginia Beach Public Schools](#) has included a unique feature on their website which allows visitors to look up schools participating in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) in their district. Children attending CEP schools may be required to apply for Summer EBT. Although all students at these schools receive free meals, only those directly certified through programs like SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or Medicaid — or who are homeless, in foster care, or from migrant households — automatically qualify. All other income-eligible children in these schools must apply to receive benefits.

[Santa Rosa Public Schools](#) in California includes a website about Summer EBT that links to the state application in both English and Spanish. They also provide the phone number for the Child Nutrition Services for the schools for families to ask questions.

### ▪ Nonprofit Organizations

Beyond schools, families often turn to community organizations for information. Many of these organizations may face similar capacity limitations but can help encourage families to participate. These groups could include faith-based organizations, immigrant support groups, libraries, and other local partners.

Like community organizations, anti-hunger organizations can play a big role when it comes to Summer EBT outreach. The New York Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance has partnered with Hunger Solutions New York on a [webinar](#) informing community organizations of the program, opportunities for outreach, and answering questions about the program. By providing information to these groups to share, states can ensure that information about the program reaches as many eligible families as possible.

The Arizona Food Bank Network highlighted that it is important for nonprofit organizations to plan ahead and budget for Summer EBT outreach to ensure that they can create proper translations and pay for social media ads. They also find that state agencies can face a lot of red tape when it comes to communicating with families, and relying on community partners can be one way of ensuring all families are informed.

## ▪ Food Banks

Food banks can also play a vital role in reaching families. As shared by the [Greater Chicago Food Depository](#), most food banks have a network of pantries that provides a natural connection point for families to learn about Summer EBT. Food banks can share materials that can be utilized by these pantries to reach specific populations. Food banks can promote the program on their website as well and help craft communication materials to support the state agency's outreach. Food banks typically have funding that many other community organizations do not, allowing them greater ability to support resource creation, family communication, and financial support.

### *Individual Family Communication*

State agencies are required to send out multiple notices to families who are streamline-certified for Summer EBT each year. The first required notice informs families that they will automatically receive Summer EBT benefits. They also must send out a notice of approval status within 15 operational days of receiving an application. When a family receives a card, it must include an explanation of what the card is and how to use it. State agencies must send notices of denial, which must include how a family can appeal, and a notice 30 days before benefits are removed from a family's card. While not required, states should consider sending postcards to all families in CEP schools explaining Summer EBT eligibility for the program to maximize participation from children in those schools.

As mentioned previously, a state must have a call center to answer questions from families. Call centers should be adequately staffed to minimize the wait times for families. States should also track previous calls so that an update on their case can be provided to families if they call back. Utilizing multiple methods — including online chat, email, or text message — for families to ask questions are also a best practice. For example, families in Pennsylvania that participate in another benefit program can utilize the online platform called [COMPASS](#) to submit questions through the portal.

### *Messaging*

A key part of Summer EBT outreach is deciding on the messaging to use when promoting and talking about the program. Families are often unfamiliar with many of the acronyms used to describe the program, so clear, straightforward messaging is key. An example of clear messaging can be found on [summerebt.org](#) where all answers to [frequently asked questions](#) and all [information](#) about the program is in easy to read language. Additionally, families need information in the language that they speak, meaning that translations of all materials must be available.

The Arizona Food Bank Network noted that states and community partners must have consistent messaging for all families and that utilizing resources such as zip-code level data on Summer EBT benefit utilization and data on CEP schools. This level of data can help target outreach to specific schools and school districts to notify families of the benefit. Additionally, they highlighted the importance of recognizing when you are not the best messenger and finding the best option. For example, an immigrant community may not trust information on Summer EBT coming from a state agency but would from a faith partner or a school.

## *Cross Promotion*

A vital part of ensuring children have access to the nutrition they need for the summer is the cross-promotion of programs. As Summer EBT fills the gaps left by Summer Nutrition Programs, it is important that families be informed about both programs. States are required to promote the Summer Nutrition Programs, but Summer EBT is not part of that requirement. However, some anti-hunger organizations are encouraging their states to take a more active role in the cross-promotion of summer meal sites and Summer EBT. Hunger Solutions New York has included Summer EBT language on their [summer meals website](#), as well as created [outreach materials](#) that promote both programs. They have also convened a summer nutrition workgroup with organizations, food banks, and schools across the state to share challenges and best practices, and brainstorm strategies for reaching all children with summer meals and Summer EBT.

## **Conclusion**

Summer EBT is an effective way to combat food insecurity and improve nutrition during the summer months when children no longer have access to school meal programs. To maximize participation in the program, states must ensure that families are aware of the program and how to access and utilize the benefits. To do this, states need to tap into every outreach pathway they have available to them, from leveraging partnerships with non-governmental organizations to creating materials that can be utilized by schools, local governments, and organizations across the state. By ensuring that all eligible children receive the benefit, states can contribute to the success of the Summer EBT Program, leading to a decrease in summer hunger.